So That All People Can See Themselves

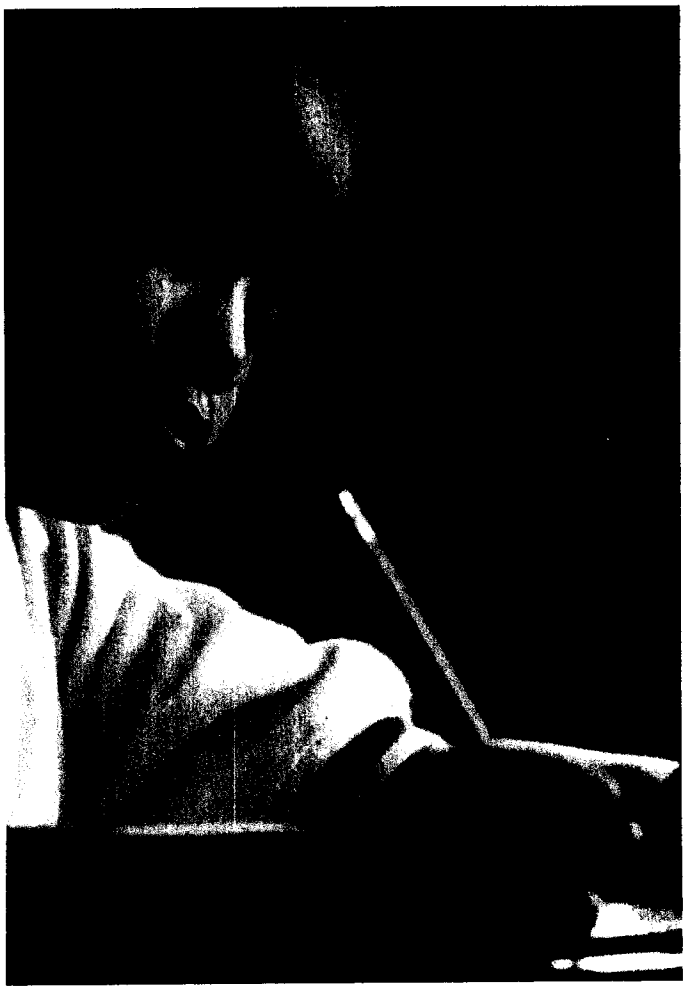
By heeding the voices of culturally diverse students with learning difficulties, we can help them excel.

Stanley C. Trent

In the No Child Left Behind Act and the current reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, educators and policymakers have embraced the goal of high achievement for *all* learners—including culturally diverse learners and those with learning disabilities (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, in press).

In view of our history, I wonder whether we will ever be able to attain this laudable goal. As broad legislative mandates and policy initiatives address these issues at the macro level, educators in school districts, schools, classrooms, and teacher preparation programs must do the more delicate and demanding work of meeting all students' needs at the micro level.

My daughter Angelina taught me something about how we can transform our beliefs and instructional practices to extend school success to a broader array of students, including the historically marginalized and underserved.



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Unexpected News

When Angelina's kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Tony, called to schedule a meeting with my wife Miranda and me, we did not feel concerned. After all, I had 11 years of experience as a special education teacher and administrator and had just become an assistant professor of special education. I had reinforced kindergarten skills with Angelina on an intermittent basis, and from our observations, Miranda and I believed that she was holding her own. Needless to say, we were shocked and unprepared for what Mrs. Tony said:

> I think Angelina has a severe learning disability. Every ounce of what she learns is a struggle. At the beginning of next year, I think she should be tested for special education placement.

For the first time, I found myself on the opposite side of the table, hearing from a teacher the painful news that I had relayed to so many parents. Before now, we had assumed that the only thing standing between Angelina and the accomplishment of her goals would be the limitations that she placed on herself. For a short time, these dreams became blurred.

Soon, however, we regrouped, refocused, and vowed that we would not give up on our baby. As her father and "resource teacher," I realized that I needed to dig deeper. I also needed to move beyond the deficit

perspective that is so deeply entrenched in teacher preparation programs, schools, and special education law itself (Trent, Artiles, & Englert, 1998).

Transformations

The identification of Angelina's learning problems turned out to be a transformative experience that affected my life as a father and teacher educator. Mrs. Tony and I started communicating through a traveling notebook, sharing ideas about what was working at home and at school. This ongoing communication led to integration of activities between the two settings that did improve Angelina's performance.

I began talking with colleagues who supported a constructivist framework that integrated both explicit, teacher-directed practices and student-centered practices (Edwards, 1990; Englert, Tarrant, & Mariage, 1992). In addition, I reflected on how educators could use multicultural approaches to make learning more meaningful, relevant, and transformative for all students (Banks, 1998). Until then, I had not engaged in this type of reflection, soul searching, and information gathering. Lack of collaboration and reflection had stifled my development as a teacher. My 7-year-old daughter gave me the opportunity to transform my thinking and my practice.

The Letter

By 2nd grade, Angelina had made significant progress in reading and math, but she still needed additional support at school and at home. Instead of having her evaluated for special education, we decided to provide supplementary support for her at home while she received supplementary instruction in reading and math through Title I services at school.

The more I worked with Angelina, the more I understood the importance of observing and listening to what she

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was showing and telling me. Her personal interests and concerns were just as important as what emanated from the textbooks, teachers' manuals, materials, and activities that I used to support her learning.

One day, Angelina asked,

> Daddy, how come there aren't more dolls of color in the American Girls collection? There's only Addy, an African American who was a slave. The other four are all white, and we were more than just slaves.

Angelina's interest presented a golden opportunity that I could not ignore. I turned to her and said,

> If you believe this is unfair, how about writing them a letter and telling them? You can tell them how much you like your Addy, but also recommend that they add dolls of color. But I'm curious. Why do you think this is important?

"Because everybody needs to see themselves," she replied.

That answer was enough for me. This profound statement reinforced my belief that my daughter was a remarkable little girl who possessed deep understandings about social issues that her school rarely addressed. She was much more than a walking deficit.

After a bit of nudging, she agreed to accept the challenge. We worked on the letter for about two weeks. The final product read:

> Dear Pleasant Company:
> I got an Addy doll and I love it! Thank you for making the American Girls collection. I was wondering if you could make more dolls of color. I hope I'm not offending you. I think you should make more dolls because it's important to make dolls so that all people can see themselves. For example, Eskimo, more African American, Asian American, Native American, Hispanic American, mixed. Maybe you could make a doll that looks like Singing Bird in the Kirsten story and maybe you could make Pocahontas. She is a Native American girl and she was real but she died, just in case you don't know. These are all the people who made America great, too.
> Again, thanks for the Addy doll.
> Love,
> Angelina
> A 7-year-old African AMERICAN girl

We mailed the letter and as far as Angelina was concerned, that was that. She was convinced that she would never get a reply. I was the one who hustled to the mailbox every day after work. I believed that a response would have a lasting effect on her self-confidence and motivation to learn, especially if the company addressed her concerns.

About a month later, I found in our mailbox a letter addressed to Miss Angelina Trent. My heart raced. Should I give her the letter, or send her to get it? I decided that having her discover her letter would be more empowering.

I entered the house, trying to look casual. "Oh, man," I croaked. "I forgot to get the mail. Angelina, would you run out and get it for me?"

"OK," she said, having no clue that something special awaited her in the mailbox. I looked out the window just in time to see her pull out the pile of mail. When she spotted the letter, she gasped. She waved it in the air screaming, "Daddy, Daddy, the Pleasant Company sent me a letter!"

Entering the house, she ripped open the letter and asked me to read it for her; she was too nervous. The letter thanked Angelina for her suggestion and

commended her on recognizing the many differences among people and wanting them to be recognized. It mentioned a new magazine called *American Girl* for girls 7 years and older that would enable girls from many different groups to share information about their history and culture. The letter ended,

> We appreciate your enthusiastic response to Addy. Since the American Girls collection is an ongoing development, your suggestion is a valuable resource in helping us determine the direction of the collection. Again, thank you for taking the time to share your feelings; they are very important to us.

Angelina's face beamed with excitement. She believed that her letter *had* made a difference. Of course, we subscribed to the magazine. About a year later, she received a catalog introducing a new product that enabled children to design their own doll by selecting skin and eye color; hair color and texture; and eye, nose, and lip shape. The catalog stated that the line had been created in response to hundreds of letters from American girls who asked for a more diverse collection. With joy, Angelina ordered her African American doll with brown eyes, textured brown hair, and brown skin like her own.

More recently, Pleasant Company introduced two more dolls to the main collection: Hispanic American Josefina and Native American Kaya. Once again, the company announced that letters from American girls influenced their decision to expand the line. At 16, Angelina is now more interested in surfing the Internet, hanging out at the mall, and thinking about boys, but she also believes that she is still seeing the fruits of her labor.

Lessons Learned

My experience as Angelina's "resource teacher" helped me develop a framework for my views about teaching and learning. Within this framework, I first had to understand Freire's statement that "there is, in fact, no teaching without learning" (1998, p. 31). My instruction was not as effective when it emanated only from my views, goals, and objectives. I also had to embed learning in activities that were meaningful and relevant to Angelina. I had to hear and heed her voice. The knowledge, feelings, and beliefs that she brought to the learning situation served as the springboard to teach literacy skills in a contextual and meaningful manner (Moll & Gonzalez, 1997).

"I have had so many teachers who have made decisions based on what they *think* they know about me."

Teaching Angelina helped me learn the importance of responding to each student's individual academic needs. Before working with her on her letter, I had used a teacher-centered, direct instruction reading program with Angelina for about 15 minutes every evening to reinforce phonetic skills. I continued to use this program with her, but I also began to reinforce these skills and strategies within the context of her writing. For instance, I would model aloud the strategy for decoding *Consonant-Vowel-Consonant-Silent e* words each time she wanted to use one. I would tell her, "Angelina, look carefully at this word. The *e* makes the vowel *a* say its name." Then I would ask her to repeat the rule. Throughout this process, I watched and listened for signs of internalization and self-regulation, providing and relinquishing scaffolds until the day she said, "Daddy, wait, don't tell me! The *e* makes the vowel say its name. C-A-S-E, *case.*"

Finally, following Angelina's lead helped me incorporate multiculturalism not as a separate entity, but as a major thread that tied together subject matter content, technical skills, and instructional interventions. Her question extended beyond food, folks, culture fairs, and African American History Month. It led to learning activities that encouraged her to see other people's perspectives and develop essential communication skills (Banks, 1998).

Angelina has become an avid reader and writer and plans to study writing and visual arts in college. Since that first letter, she has continued to protest rules and practices that she deems unjust. When I asked her why she gets involved in social justice issues, she replied,

> Even if our efforts to change things don't work out, we still need to try to make a difference. I think teachers need to do more to help students understand this. It motivates you to learn.

I also asked Angelina what advice she had for teachers who taught culturally diverse students. She responded,

> One of the most important things they should *not* do is to stereotype. Another thing is not to assume *anything*. I have had so many teachers who have made decisions based on what they *think* they know about me. They shouldn't assume; they should communicate to find out what the student is thinking.

Mandates, policies, and reform initiatives at the macro level will not improve educational outcomes and life chances for culturally diverse learners unless we also transform ourselves at the micro level.

Angelina and I challenge K–12 educators and teacher educators to help all students see themselves in ways that honor their voices and the voices of their families. We also challenge educators to engage in ongoing reflection and collaborative inquiry to identify the

origins of stereotypes and low expectations that place the primary blame for failure on students and families without ever questioning the appropriateness and efficacy of instructional practices.

In the midst of standards-based reform and high-stakes testing, such activities may help us finally accomplish the goals of equity and high achievement for all students—goals that have remained elusive and intractable since the genesis of public education in the United States. ■

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Stanley C. Trent is an associate professor of special education at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville; (434) 924-7844; sct3m@cms.mail.virginia.edu.